

Feature Profile - Social Work Alumna Sonya Bourgeois

Sonya Bourgeois completed her Master's of Social Work at York University, and is currently a policy professional with the Ontario Public Service. She has led projects in the areas of violence against women, health policy, community and social service delivery, and gender-based policy and program development. She has published in the areas of women and HIV, and access to abortion in Canada. Early in her career, she worked as a fundraising professional in the areas of human rights, mental health, and community development. She is a former staff of the Redwood Shelter and currently a member of their Board of Directors.

Tell me about your social work career path.

My social work path started at Ryerson University where I earned my Bachelor's in Social Work. While attending Ryerson University, I was working for a fundraising consultancy where I worked alongside a number of human rights and social justice non-governmental organizations to raise funds to support their programs. Through this work, I realized that I ultimately wanted to be involved in working with community and policy development.

Following my degree at Ryerson University, I entered the Masters in Social Work program at York University. I used my time at York University to strengthen my clinical social work skills and focus on developing my research. As a part of my practicum, I was placed at Women's Health in Women's Hands Community Health Centre, where my focus was on community-based research. Through my practicum, I was connected to a summer research position at Women's Health Research Institute, and at the same time, joined The Redwood, a shelter for women and children, where I worked as a community outreach counsellor. I spent a few years at The Redwood in different roles, while also working as a sexual health counsellor at the Morgentaler Clinic in Toronto.

Through my frontline social work experience, I realized that I wanted to be involved in policy development and better understand the systemic structures that had a direct impact on the lives of women and children. I joined the Ontario Public Service and have had the opportunity to lead projects and policy development in the areas of violence against women, health policy, community and social service delivery, and gender-based policy and program development. In order to launch my career in public policy, I leveraged my time at York University, particularly my learning and

development in research methodologies and completing my Major Research Paper (Practice Based Research Paper).

Majority of your career has been working with the provincial government doing policy work. What have been some of the highlights and challenges?

Throughout my time in the Ontario Public Service, I have had the opportunity to work on a variety of issues and have seen some important outcomes. For example, I have helped to shape gender policy in the province, including being able to influence policy development in Ontario's violence against women sector. I have also been involved in a variety of legislative and regulatory changes impacting Ontario's health system, ultimately aimed at strengthening Ontario's health system.

I would say that one of the challenges that I have found is the interdisciplinary nature of policy development within the provincial government. For example, there are social workers who work in policy; however, there are a number of other types of professionals that bring the lenses of their various professions to the policy development process. I consistently apply the critical social work practice lens to my day-to-day work, while working to balancing existing priorities within the context of the current government mandate and the various priorities of other sectors.

What advice would you give to social workers who want a career in policy and advocacy?

I would say that it is important to position yourself through the curriculum in the program and the practicum placements to ensure that you are building skills in written and verbal communication, analysis and critical thinking, and research. That said, I gained much from my frontline experience and work with community-based organizations, and I often draw on these experiences in my policy development work. I would advise social workers who want a career in policy and advocacy to spend some time building their experience through frontline work.

Why did you decide to study at York University?

I was really drawn to the mission and values of the School of Social Work at York University, and, the commitment to critical social work practice. Coming from Ryerson University where the focus is on anti-oppressive social work practice, I felt that moving on to York University would be a natural fit for me and would allow for me to expand

on my social work foundation. I was quite inspired by the faculty in the School of Social Work at York University, and I am truly grateful for the learning and opportunities I gained through the school. Specifically, I felt that the focus on the Major Research Paper at the Master's level prepared me for a social work career beyond frontline practice, and opened other possibilities in the realm of policy development and research.

What were some of your favourite moments when you were a student at York?

My favourite classes in the Master's program in the School of Social Work included Critical Perspectives in Social Work and Studies in Social Policy. I felt that through my course work I had the freedom to challenge my own beliefs and grow as an individual, both academically and personally. I also gained a lot from my Graduate Research Seminar, while working with a small group of fellow students and closely with my Professor, I was able to gain insights into research methodologies used by other students, and learn from the successes and challenges of my colleagues.

What were some of the challenges?

I found that the transition between undergraduate and graduate studies was challenging, as graduate studies required much more independence and self-direction. In particular, I found the workload within the graduate program challenging, as I had to balance my course work, practicum, and Major Research Paper, while of course, continuing to take care of myself within my personal life. In many ways, I feel that the workload served as a preparation for my professional life, as I am often tasked with balancing multiple, competing priorities and having to find the balance.

What words of wisdom do you have about bridging practice and theory?

When I think about bridging practice and theory, I think it is always important to think about the impact of your work on individuals, communities, and the larger society. I often find that in my day to day work, I am constantly reflecting on my actions and connecting issues with larger theoretical frameworks. Ultimately, my advice for bridging practice and theory is to never stop questioning your actions within your practice, along the lines of privilege and identity, and finding opportunities to use your personal power to further breakdown inequities. I use critical social work practice in my day-to-day work when I engage in self-questioning and self-introspection on how I can continue to grow and engage critically.

What advice would you give to new social worker graduates?

As a social worker, I certainly feel that there are a number of opportunities, depending on your personal areas of interest. For example, as someone with a social work degree, I felt that I could have a future within community organizations, engaging in community development, research, and frontline practice, as well as other opportunities in the government and the broader public sector. My advice would be to follow your passion, but to keep your options open and think outside the box, as sometimes your career might take an unexpected turn or lead you in an area that you were not necessarily expecting. In many ways, the skills that you will gain through York University can be leveraged to pursue a number of different paths. I think it is important to be strategic about where you choose to do practicums, as often these initial connections can open doors in your future.

What does being a York University Social Work Alumna mean to you?

As an alumna of York University Social Work, I see myself as a part of a larger community of individuals who are committed to critical social work practice, and to finding opportunities to support individuals and communities, while also allowing for critical reflection and analysis of existing systems and structures that create social, economic, and health inequities.